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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 9088

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RUEHPF/AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH 0092

RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 9651

RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 2580

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0457

RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0095

RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6945

RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0378

RHEFHLC/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC

RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

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RUENAAA/SECNAV WASHDC

RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC

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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE FOR NOAA, USGS

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY FOR FEMA

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE FOR U.S. COAST GUARD

DEPARTMENT OF STATE FOR SCA, OES, AND IO

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES SEEKS ASSISTANCE WITH CLIMATE CHANGE
ISSUES

REF: COLOMBO 1033

¶11. ESTHOFF met with Maldivian government officials on the margins of the Climate Vulnerable Forum November 9-10 (reftel) and in Male November 15 to discuss a range of climate change and other environmental issues. The Government of the Maldives (GOM) has called climate change its number one national security concern and announced plans to reach carbon-neutrality by 2020 -- an ambitious goal for a lesser-developed country. After successful democratic elections last year, new policy makers, politicians, and even civil servants are in many ways starting from scratch in trying to better understand climate change and environmental challenges confronting the nation. While their hearts are in the right place, government officials admit that a good deal of outside support would be welcomed in such areas as training, outreach, capacity building, equipment and materials as they seek to enhance their ability to manage environmental issues and climate change challenges.

TSUNAMI FOLLOW-ON AND HARBOR MITIGATION ISSUES

¶12. Mohamed Shahid, Director General of the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC), noted that 60% of the nation's GDP was destroyed when the tsunami hit the islands on December 26, 2004, leading to the displacement of as many as 25,000 individuals. After nearly five years, 1600 remain displaced, although housing units continue to be built on home islands. Noting the importance of intact reef systems -- which surround the islands -- to protect against both future tsunamis and climate change, the DG (on the job for 10 months) asked for information regarding what he described as a NOAA/NASA/Navy project which maps reef systems to ensure that harbor dredging and design limits damage to the ecosystem and beach erosion. He also requested FEMA and NOAA assistance on capacity building and information sharing. Finally, he indicated the USG may have old (25-plus years) satellite images of Maldives which are declassified. Shahid

asked if these could be shared to assist the GOM in better understanding shifts in their own islands.

CORAL REEFS

¶3. Mr. Hussein Zahir, Senior Reef Ecologist at the Marine Research Center (MRC), part of the Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture, and Marine Resources, also requested capacity building and information-sharing assistance. He noted that the World Bank's "Maldives Environmental Management Project" -- a five-year, \$13 million project begun in 2008 -- is well underway and already producing reports identifying needs, including on coral reef issues. The Maldives participates in all Coral Reef Monitoring Network (managed through the South Asia Cooperative Environmental Project, SACEP) projects. Zahir emphasized that because the 1190 islands of the Maldives are surrounded by atolls and coral reefs, the country is a particularly good platform for coral reef science. The MRC recently took possession of an island in the Male atoll which formerly housed a fish processing plant, and is turning the site into a research facility for use by scientists worldwide. Zahir requested assistance in funding, equipping, and publicizing the site among the official and university scientific community the United States and provided a report outlining the location's needs. He also said the GOM is interested in learning more about whether coral reefs -- the "forests of the seas" -- could be a potential source for carbon sequestration.

¶4. Zahir related the good news that many of the reefs damaged

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by the 1998 El Nino bleaching incident have rebounded extremely well, particularly in the southern atolls and the western side of the central atolls. He requested assistance in linking up with scientists in the U.S. to learn more about ocean acidification and its potential effects on coral reefs and the Maldivian islands. He explained that the Maldives has only six graduate-level scientists working on coral reef issues and affirmed outside expertise would be welcomed. He also noted that he has no base-line data regarding his country's fisheries, coral reef quality, or beach erosion. He asked if any USG agencies might have data from the 1980s we could share.

CLIMATE CHANGE

¶5. The GOM is extremely focused on climate change research, mitigation, adaptation, and prevention. Post is aware of a NOAA-led ten-day course offered entitled "Planning for Climate Change in the Coastal and Marine Environment." GOM officials with the Vice President's office, the Ministry for Housing, Transport, and Environment, and the Ministry for Fisheries, Agriculture, and Marine Resources all expressed interest in exploring options for bringing this capacity-building and information-sharing course to Maldives in the first half of 2010, something Post strongly supports.

ACTION REQUEST

¶6. Post requests Department assistance in identifying governmental, non-governmental, and university partners to begin building relationships between appropriate officials in the Maldives on environmental and climate change activities. Possible interlocutors within the USG from NOAA, FEMA, USGS, Coast Guard, Navy, AID, and elsewhere should contact ESTH officer Ken Kero-Mentz via unclassified email at keroka@state.gov. Post will also provide copies of the World Bank and coral reef research facility reports noted above upon request.

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